

Lord Tarbat's Relations

Folk-Lore And Legends: Scotland

Scottish

Advanced
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Sir,—I heard very much, but believed very little of the second sight; yet its being assumed by several of great veracity, I was induced to make inquiry after it in the year 1652, being then confined in the north of Scotland by the English usurpers. The more general accounts of it were that many Highlanders, yet far more Islanders, were qualified with this second sight; and men, women, and children, indistinctly, were subject to it, and children where parents were not. Sometimes people came to age who had it not when young, nor could any tell by what means produced. It is a trouble to most of them who are subject to it, and they would be rid of it at any rate if they could. The sight is of no long duration, only continuing so long as they can keep their eyes steady without twinkling. The hardy, therefore, fix their look that they may see the longer; but the timorous see only glances—their eyes always twinkle at the first sight of the object. That which generally is seen by them are the species of living creatures, and of inanimate things, which be in motion, such as ships, and habits upon persons. They never see the species of any person who is already dead. What they foresee fails not to exist in the mode, and in that place where it appears to them. They cannot well know what space of time shall intervene between the apparition and the real existence. But some of the hardiest and longest experience have some rules for conjectures; as, if they see a man with a shrouding sheet in the apparition, they will conjecture at the nearness or remoteness of his death by the more or less of his body that is covered by it. They will ordinarily see their absent friends, though at a great distance, sometimes no less than from America to Scotland, sitting,

standing, or walking in some certain place; and then they conclude with an assurance that they will see them so, and there. If a man be in love with a woman, they will ordinarily see the species of that man standing by her, and so likewise if a woman be in love. If they see the species of any person who is sick to die, they see them covered over with the shrouding sheet.

These generals I had verified to me by such of them as did see, and were esteemed honest and sober by all the neighbourhood; for I inquired after such for my information. And because there were more of these seers in the isles of Lewis, Harris, and Uist than in any other place, I did entreat Sir James M'Donald (who is now dead), Sir Normand M' Loud, and Mr. Daniel Morison, a very honest person (who are still alive), to make inquiry in this uncouth sight, and to acquaint me therewith; which they did, and all found an agreement in these generals, and informed me of many instances confirming what they said. But though men of discretion and honour, being but at second-hand, I will choose rather to put myself than my friends on the hazard of being laughed at for incredible relations.

I was once travelling in the Highlands, and a good number of servants with me, as is usual there; and one of them, going a little before me, entering into a house where I was to stay all night, and going hastily to the door, he suddenly slipped back with a screech, and did fall by a stone, which hit his foot. I asked what the matter was, for he seemed to be very much frightened. He told me very seriously that I should not lodge in that house, because shortly a dead coffin would be carried out of it, for many were carrying of it when he was heard cry. I, neglecting his words, and staying there, he said to other of his servants he was sorry for it, and that surely what he saw would shortly come to pass. Though no sick person was then there, yet the landlord, a healthy Highlander, died of an apoplectic fit before I left the house.

In the year 1653 Alexander Monro (afterwards Lieutenant-Colonel to the Earl of Dumbarton's regiment) and I were walking in a place called Ullapool, in Loch Broom, on a little plain at the foot of a rugged hill. There was a servant walking with a spade in the walk before us; his back was to us, and his face to the hill. Before we came to him he let the spade fall, and looked toward the hill. He took notice of us as we passed near by him, which made me look at him, and perceiving him to stare a little strangely I conjectured him to be a seer. I called at him, at which he started and smiled. "What are you doing?" said I. He answered, "I have seen a very strange thing: an army of Englishmen, leading of horses, coming down that hill; and a number of them are coming down to the plain, and eating the barley which is growing in the field near to the hill." This was on the 4th May

(for I noted the day), and it was four or five days before the barley was sown in the field he spoke of. Alexander Monro asked him how he knew they were Englishmen. He said because they were leading of horses, and had on hats and boots, which he knew no Scotchman would have there. We took little notice of the whole story as other than a foolish vision, but wished that an English party were there, we being then at war with them, and the place almost inaccessible for horsemen. But in the beginning of August thereafter, the Earl of Middleton (then Lieutenant for the King in the Highlands), having occasion to march a party of his towards the South Highlands, he sent his Foot through a place called Inverlawell; and the fore-party, which was first down the hill, did fall off eating the barley which was on the little plain under it. And Monro calling to mind what the seer told us in May preceding, he wrote of it, and sent an express to me to Lochslin, in Ross (where I then was), with it.

I had occasion once to be in company where a young lady was (excuse my not naming of persons), and I was told there was a notable seer in the company. I called him to speak with me, as I did ordinarily when I found any of them; and after he had answered me several questions, I asked if he knew any person to be in love with that lady. He said he did, but he knew not the person; for, during the two days he had been in her company, he perceived one standing near her, and his head leaning on her shoulder, which he said did foretell that the man should marry her, and die before her, according to his observation. This was in the year 1655. I desired him to describe the person, which he did, so that I could conjecture, by the description, of such a one, who was of that lady's acquaintance, though there were no thoughts of their marriage till two years thereafter. And having occasion in the year 1657 to find this seer, who was an islander, in company with the other person whom I conjectured to have been described by him, I called him aside, and asked if that was the person he saw beside the lady near two years then past. He said it was he indeed, for he had seen that lady just then standing by him hand in hand. This was some few months before their marriage, and that man is now dead, and the lady alive.

I shall trouble you but with one more, which I thought most remarkable of any that occurred to me.

In January 1652, the above-mentioned Lieutenant, Colonel Alex. Monro, and I, happened to be in the house of one William M'Clend, of Ferrinlea, in the county of Ross. He, the landlord, and I, were sitting in three chairs near the fire, and in the corner of the great chimney there were two islanders, who were that very night come to the house, and were related to the landlord. While the one of them was talking with Monro, I perceived the other to look oddly toward me. From this look, and his being an islander, I conjectured him a seer, and asked

him at what he stared. He answered by desiring me to rise from that chair, for it was an unlucky one. I asked him why? He answered, because there was a dead man in the chair next to me. "Well," said I, "if it be in the next chair, I may keep my own. But what is the likeness of the man?" He said he was a tall man, with a long grey coat, booted, and one of his legs hanging over the arm of the chair, and his head hanging dead to the other side, and his arm backward, as if it was broken. There were some English troops then quartered near that place, and there being at that time a great frost after a thaw, the country was covered all over with ice. Four or five of the English riding by this house some two hours after the vision, while we were sitting by the fire, we heard a great noise, which proved to be those troopers, with the help of other servants, carrying in one of their number, who had got a very mischievous fall, and had his arm broke; and falling frequently in swooning fits, they brought him into the hall, and set him in the very chair, and in the very posture that the seer had prophesied. But the man did not die, though he recovered with great difficulty.

Among the accounts given me by Sir Normand M'LOUD, there was one worthy of special notice, which was thus:—There was a gentleman in the Isle of Harris, who was always seen by the seers with an arrow in his thigh. Such in the Isle who thought those prognostications infallible, did not doubt but he would be shot in the thigh before he died. Sir Normand told me that he heard it the subject of their discourse for many years. At last he died without any such accident. Sir Normand was at his burial at St. Clement's Church in the Harris. At the same time the corpse of another gentleman was brought to be buried in the same very church. The friends on either side came to debate who should first enter the church, and, in a trice, from words they came to blows. One of the number (who was armed with bow and arrows) let one fly among them. (Now every family in that Isle have their burial-place in the Church in stone chests, and the bodies are carried in open biers to the burial-place.) Sir Normand having appeased the tumult, one of the arrows was found shot in the dead man's thigh. To this Sir Normand was a witness.

In the account which Mr. Daniel Morison, parson in the Lewis, gave me, there was one, though it be heterogeneous from the subject, yet it may be worth your notice. It was of a young woman in this parish, who was mightily frightened by seeing her own image still before her, always when she came to the open air; the back of the image being always to her, so that it was not a reflection as in a mirror, but the species of such a body as her own, and in a very like habit which appeared to herself continually before her. The parson kept her a long while with him, but had no remedy of her evil, which troubled her exceedingly. I was told afterwards

that when she was four or five years older she saw it not.

These are matters of fact, which I assure you they are truly related. But these and all others that occurred to me, by information or otherwise, could never lead me into a remote conjecture of the cause of so extraordinary a phenomenon. Whether it be a quality in the eyes of some people in these parts, concurring with a quality in the air also; whether such species be everywhere, though not seen by the want of eyes so qualified, or from whatever other cause, I must leave to the inquiry of clearer judgments than mine. But a hint may be taken from this image which appeared still to this woman above mentioned, and from another mentioned by Aristotle, in the fourth of his Metaphysics (if I remember right, for it is long since I read it), as also from the common opinion that young infants (unsullied with many objects) do see apparitions which were not seen by those of elder years; as likewise from this, that several did see the second sight when in the Highlands or Isles, yet when transported to live in other countries, especially in America, they quite lose this quality, as was told me by a gentleman who knew some of them in Barbadoes, who did see no vision there, although he knew them to be seers when they lived in the Isles of Scotland.

Thus far my Lord Tarbat.

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